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ABSTRACT

Seattle's Comprehensive Child Care Program (CCCP) (Washington) is made up of a child care subsidy to offset child care costs for working and student families with low incomes, and quality assurance and technical assistance for 150 child care providers, including on-site evaluations, public health consulting, continuing education for providers, and individual consultation with CCCP staff. As part of Phase I of an evaluation of CCCP, 14 enrolled and 9 wait-listed parents participated in 4 focus groups. In addition, confidential surveys were mailed to a random sample of parents (148 enrolled parents; 72 wait-listed parents). Survey and focus group findings indicated that: (1) the program subsidy helps families remain self-sufficient by enabling parents to work or attend school, increasing parents' employment stability, and improving financial status; (2) the subsidy offers parents the use of quality child care they trust, with enrolled parents using licensed child care more than wait-listed parents, feeling their child care is of high quality with greater satisfaction, and feeling their child had experienced improvements in learning and emotional well-being; (3) enrolled parents are positive about the CCCP, finding it to be supportive, whereas wait-listed parents are often frustrated with the waiting period for enrollment and with poor communication. Study recommendations include funding of the subsidy component, elimination of the wait list, and increased communication between the CCCP and families. (RR)

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COMPREHENSIVE CHILD CARE PROGRAM

Phase 1 – Evaluation Results

September 1997

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Executive Summary

The child care subsidy component of the Comprehensive Child Care Program (CCCP) provides working families with assistance to meet the high cost of quality child care. Families who receive the subsidy choose a licensed child care facility that contracts with the CCCP, and pay part of their child care costs depending on family size and income. Without this assistance, many families would be unable to meet their financial obligations and would be forced to use other forms of public assistance or to quit their jobs to care for their children.

Key Findings: Phase 1

- The child care subsidy helps families to remain self-sufficient.
- The child care subsidy offers parents the opportunity to use quality child care they trust.
- Participating parents are overwhelmingly positive about the CCCP and its staff.

Harachi and Associates was contracted in April 1997 to design an evaluation plan for the CCCP. Phase 1 of the evaluation examined the impacts of the subsidy component. Specific evaluation questions included:

- the effect of receiving the subsidy on parents' financial situation, including job retention and ability to work consistently.
- how parents' perceive and choose "quality" child care and whether the subsidy provides access to higher quality child care.
- parents' perceptions of the program's administration and staff.

Recommendations

- Fully fund the subsidy component of the CCCP to ensure that enrolled families remain self-sufficient.
- Increase funding to eliminate the wait list to provide waiting families in financial distress with the assistance they need.
- Improve communication between the CCCP and enrolled and wait list families to increase access to information and address potential problems.
- Provide funding to conduct Phase 2 of the evaluation, to examine the effectiveness of the other components of the program.

Impacts of the child care subsidy as reported by enrolled parents:

1st Could afford better quality child care
2nd Less family stress
3rd Overall improved financial situation
4th Able to afford health insurance
5th Improvement in child's learning and emotional well-being

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Program Description

The Comprehensive Child Care Program supports families' success by ensuring access to affordable, high quality child care that respects culture and diversity. The program's vision is healthy child and youth development and economic well-being for families through community partnerships and shared resources.

The program has two major components:

1) a child care subsidy provided to parents to help offset the cost of child care; and
2) quality assurance and technical assistance provided to child care providers to improve the quality of child care delivered.

Each component is important to ensure the availability and affordability of quality child care for parents with limited income.

Program Utilization

Families served*	312
Children served*	442
Families Waitlisted*	196
* as of May 1997	
Annual number of Children served	650
Average length of program participation	23 months
Number of contracted child care providers	150 providers

Child Care Subsidy Component

The Comprehensive Child Care Program serves working families whose income is between 52% and 80% of the State Median Income and student families whose income is below 80% of the State Median Income. Parents choose one of the 150 licensed child care providers contracted with and annually reviewed by the CCCP. All parents pay part of the child care costs, depending on family size and income.

Unfortunately, the program is not able to serve all families who are eligible for assistance. As of August 1997, there were 270 families on a wait list. A typical family waits 11 months before being offered the subsidy.

Quality Assurance/Technical Assistance Component

CCCP provides direct technical assistance and quality assurance to the approximately 150 contracted child care providers. The goal of this assistance is to enhance the quality of child care provided at these locations to ensure that quality child care is available to the enrolled families. Activities include, but are not limited to:

- On-site annual evaluations to ensure appropriate environment, nutrition, health and safety, and other quality issues.
- Consultation by a public health nurse and nutritionist.
- Continuing education activities for child care providers designed to address the specific needs and concerns of providers.
- Individual consultation with CCCP staff to address problems or concerns with the functioning of the child care center.

Phase 1: Methodology

Focus Groups

Harachi and Associates held four focus groups for enrolled and wait listed parents. The first two focus groups included parents of children under age 5 who were enrolled in the subsidy program; the third focus group included parents of enrolled school-age children. The last focus group was for parents on the wait list.

All the focus groups took place on weekday evenings at the Garfield Family Center in central Seattle. Wait listed parents were paid $20 for their participation. In total, 14 enrolled parents and 9 wait listed parents participated.

Parent Survey

Confidential surveys were mailed to a randomly selected group of parents enrolled in the program. For the purposes of comparison, a randomly selected group of parents not receiving the subsidy but currently on the wait list were also surveyed. Parents who did not respond to the initial survey were mailed a second survey, and later contacted and given the opportunity to complete the survey by telephone.

Interpretation was made available if parents preferred to complete the survey in a language other than English. Families who completed a survey were entered into a drawing for family passes to the Woodland Park Zoo or the Pacific Science Center. The survey yielded a total response rate of 80%, including 83.5% of the enrolled parents sampled (n=148) and 73.6% of the wait list parents sampled (n=72).

Characteristics of Families Surveyed

	Enrolled	Waitlist
Average family size	2.8	2.9
Average # of children per family	1.7	1.6
Average monthly income	$ 2,134	$ 1,901
Marital Status		
Single*	88%	70%
Married	10%	24%
Living with partner	2%	6%
* includes divorced, separated and widowed		
Race/Ethnicity of Parent		
African American	50%	26%
Caucasian	33%	42%
Latino	6%	3%
Multiracial	4%	8%
Asian	3%	15%
SE Asian/PI	2%	3%
Native American	1%	3%
Work/School Status of Parent		
Work full-time	87%	75%
Work & school	5%	10%
Work part-time	3%	6%
School full-time	1%	1%
Other	4%	8%
Education Level of Parent		
Some high school or less	3%	2%
High school graduate /GED	17%	18%
Some vocational college or AA	54%	49%
Four year college degree or more	23%	20%
Missing	3%	11%

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Phase 1: Results

Key Finding #1: The child care subsidy helps families to remain self-sufficient.

A. The child care subsidy enables parents to work full-time or attend school.

Parents credited the subsidy with making it possible for them to work; without it, many felt they would have to go on public assistance and stay home with their children, as they could not afford child care at the full price. Survey results showed that 93% of enrolled parents work or attend school full-time, and 65% of enrolled parents have maintained their job for 3 or more years. Comparatively, 86% of wait list parents work or attend school full-time, and only 40% have maintained their job for 3 years or more.

> "If it wasn't for this, I wouldn't even have tried to work, because I would have been working just to pay day care. I guess I would have been on public assistance. . . . I look around at some of the people that are out there on the street corner, and I know: that could be me. I can see that easily happening to people who don't have child care."

> "If I did not receive my subsidy, I couldn't afford to be employed. There would be no way for me to afford day care, therefore I would have to go on AFDC. I am truly, eternally grateful for the support. It has provided me with the opportunity to be independent."

Most families who participate in CCCP receive no other forms of public assistance. Only 18% of enrolled families receive medical assistance (Medicaid or the Basic Health Plan), 5% receive a housing subsidy, and less than 2% receive AFDC or food stamps. Parents on the wait list were more likely to receive all of these types of public assistance.

B. The child care subsidy increases parents' employment stability.

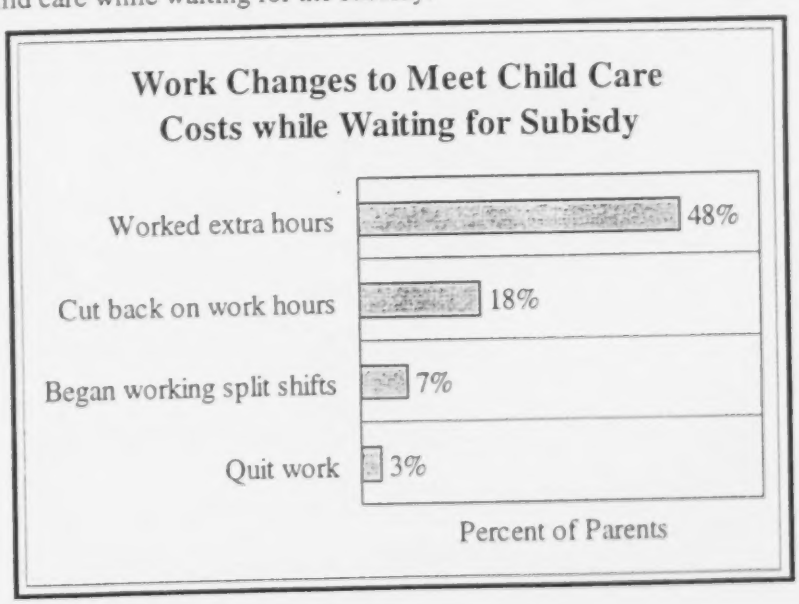
Survey results showed that the longer a parent received a subsidy, the more likely he or she was to remain at a job. Parents reported in surveys and focus groups that the child care subsidy helps them to afford stable child care which enables them to be more effective and reliable in their jobs. Enrolled parents reported significantly less likelihood of being late for work, having to leave work early, or miss work completely because of a failure in child care arrangements as compared to wait list parents.

> "I had family looking after the kids and they weren't always that reliable, if they had other things to do. Since getting the subsidy (my child care) is more reliable and that's helped me a lot."

Currently wait listed parents reported that concerns about child care could interfere with their performance at work.

> "I'm living a nightmare because when I have to go to work my 9 year old has to catch a bus [to school] by himself. He calls me before he leaves the house and he locks the door. Then he calls me when he gets home. I have no daycare. . . . I can't afford to do anything else. If I get the subsidy, I can do better at work, knowing where he's at, I'll just be more at ease."

While on the wait list, parents were forced to shift or change their work schedules in order to manage child care. The graph below reflects strategies that parents use to afford child care while waiting for the subsidy.

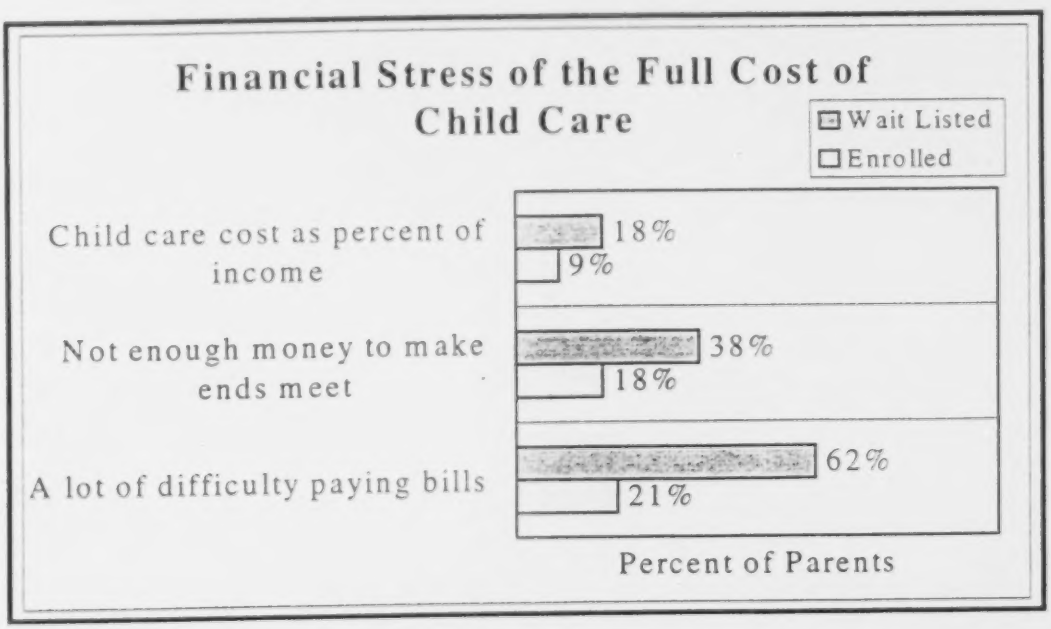


Finally, survey results showed that the enrolled parents are significantly more satisfied in their current work or school situation than parents on the wait list. This higher level of satisfaction was significantly correlated with less overall perceived stress. This finding is perhaps not surprising in light of the fact that parents who receive a child care subsidy are more able to work consistently, make fewer compromises about their working hours, and have confidence that their children are in a safe place. All of these factors contribute to the enrolled parents' ability to maintain stable employment and stay off public assistance.

> "I am a way better parent because I am not nearly as stressed out from both money and time constraints. Our schedules are normal now."

C. The child care subsidy improves families' financial situations.

Parents who are waiting for the subsidy are in greater financial distress than families who receive help in paying for child care. The average family enrolled in the program pays $197 per month, or 9% of their income, for child care. In contrast, the average family on the wait list using licensed child care pays $383 per month, or 20% of their income on child care, and some families pay much more.



Enrolled parents report significantly less difficulty paying their bills compared to the wait list group. Similarly, enrolled parents are also more likely to report enough money to make ends meet at the end of the month than wait listed parents.

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It is important to realize that even with the subsidy, families are still struggling to meet their financial obligations. Most enrolled parents reported that the subsidy enables them to meet the basic needs of their children and family that they would otherwise not be able to afford. Parents who previously had to juggle which bills to pay each month are more able to pay all their bills on time, and pay off past due bills and debts.

Some parents also mentioned being able to put money into savings or pay for a few "extras" for their children as things that the subsidy makes it possible for them to afford to do.

> "Before I was on it [the subsidy program] I didn't have insurance on my car, and now I'm saving a little bit and I have insurance on my car . . . we're not saving a lot, but $80 a month. You know, someday we want to have a house, and the kids will have a backyard. Right now we're in an apartment, but someday."

In contrast, families on the wait list reported facing real financial distress.

- 57% report they have used up savings to pay for child care.
- 57% report they had to borrow money from family or friends.
- 38% report they have gone into debt.
- 13% have dropped their health insurance.
- 12% have filed bankruptcy.

> "I didn't think I was going to need help. I didn't know my utility bills would be as high as they are, I didn't anticipate slowdowns at work. The kids get sick, and I don't have any back-up money to even buy groceries. Between paydays I run out. One month I pay my utilities on time, and my daycare is 20% short. The following month I pay all my day care and let my utilities slip. My income does not meet my utilities, my rent, and my daycare and have anything left over. And I make good money where I am. My income puts me at too high a rate to get most help anywhere. But where do you go when you still can't provide food for your kids?"

In some cases, families on the wait list have such a poor financial outlook that they are forced to make compromises in their living situations. 28% of parents on the wait list reported that they had "stayed in an undesirable living situation"; 16% reported that they had "stayed in a difficult relationship". One wait listed mother in a focus group explained that the fact that she needed to pay for child care contributed to her staying in an unhappy marriage:

> "It is very expensive, but we needed a daycare. I have an unstable marriage, my husband has immigration problems, there has been abuse, and I don't feel like I can count on anything for next year. It's so expensive -- how I'll manage next year I have no idea. . . . I hope I can continue to afford it."

Key Finding #2: The child care subsidy offers parents the opportunity to use quality child care they trust.

A. Enrolled parents are more likely to use licensed child care than wait list parents.

Survey results showed that enrolled parents are more likely than waitlisted to use a licensed child care facility. All enrolled parents used a licensed care facility, as compared to 67% of waitlisted parents.

> "The child care subsidy gave me the opportunity to go out and choose the day care that I really trusted. They were on the list, and I could pay for it."

Because the subsidy funds child care for school-age children up to age 12, parents receiving the subsidy are able to have quality care for older children who might otherwise be home alone. One parent on the wait list explained:

> "I do daycare on a daily drop-in basis. I sign him up for after school activities and sports and then I do drop-ins. When I can afford it, he goes there. When I can't, he doesn't. It's too expensive."

B. *Enrolled parents are more likely to feel their child care is of high quality and to be satisfied with their care.*

When asked how their situation has changed as a result of receiving the child care subsidy, enrolled parents ranked the ability to afford better quality child care as the number one change. 66% of enrolled parents said that since receiving the subsidy, they have been able to afford better quality child care. Enrolled parents consistently rated their child care providers as being of higher quality on several aspects than the providers they used while on the wait list. These aspects of quality included the warmth of the caregiver, the richness of the environment, the skill of the caregiver, and the amount of communication between parents and caregiver.

In keeping with the fact that parents feel their child care is of higher quality after they begin receiving the subsidy, enrolled parents are significantly more satisfied with their current child care arrangements than with those they had before receiving the subsidy.

C. *Enrolled parents felt their child had experienced improvements in learning and emotional well-being given the quality care they received.*

A number of enrolled parents reported improvements in their child's learning and emotional well-being as a result of receiving the subsidy and being able to afford better quality child care. Those who reported these child benefits rated their child care arrangement as having more creative activities. Further, these parents reported having a positive rapport with the provider, including a willingness to address problems as they arise and to share information about topics such as child development and child rearing.

Key Finding #3: Enrolled parents are overwhelmingly positive about the CCCP and its staff.

A. *Enrolled parents perceive the program and staff to be supportive.*

The majority of parents (82%) state that they are either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the subsidy program and find the intake workers "helpful" or "very helpful" (93%). Parents commented that because staff turnover is low, intake workers really get to know the families and are willing to "go the extra mile" to address parents' concerns and questions. Parents reported that they felt respected and valued in their interactions with CCCP staff. Parents also commented that their child care providers really like working with CCCP, which in turn helps to improve the parents' relationship with the providers.

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> "I've only dealt with public assistance kinds of agencies a couple times in my life, and without fail they've been the most humiliating experience a person can go through. . . . But I can say that this program has never made me feel like I'm a lesser person for needing it. I've always felt like I'm being talked to like I'm another intelligent human being trying to solve a problem, and they are there for me to help me, not throw up road blocks. I've really appreciated that."

Although parents are satisfied with the subsidy program, many did not know of the other services that CCCP provides, such as technical assistance and quality assurance for contracted child care providers. As a result, many parents are unaware that the CCCP can be a resource for them when they have questions or concerns about their child care arrangements.

Those parents who did have concerns about the program mentioned limited choices of contracted CCCP child care providers in certain geographic areas, specifically West Seattle, Capitol Hill and the Downtown core. Some parents expressed a desire to use their subsidy for family or in-home care, which is not currently an option under the guidelines of this program.

B. Wait listed parents are frustrated with the long wait for the subsidy and a lack of communication during that time.

Not surprisingly, parents on the wait list reported feeling frustrated and angry with the long wait for child care assistance. In addition, the lack of information about how long they might be on the waiting list or the likely amount of the subsidy makes it difficult for waitlisted parents to plan for the future. Wait listed parents would like more communication between the CCCP and themselves, even before they are enrolled in the program. While waiting is difficult for families, more information and support from the CCCP might help to make the wait more bearable.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In summary, the child care subsidy component of the Comprehensive Child Care Program (CCCP) provides working families with assistance to meet the high cost of quality child care. Without this assistance, many families report it would be a significant challenge for them to work. This program provides critical support to a population of working parents who do not receive other public assistance and enables them to remain self-sufficient. The CCCP subsidy improves the financial outlook of working families who would otherwise face a great deal of financial difficulty and distress. In addition, the subsidy provides access to quality, licensed child care which benefits not only the child in care, but also benefits the parent who feels confident about the arrangement and can therefore be more effective and reliable at her or his job.

These findings have implications for the subsidy component of the Comprehensive Child Care Program. Our recommendations, based on these findings, are as follows:

- **The child care subsidy component should be fully funded in the future.** These results have shown the child care subsidy is of vital importance to families if they are to remain self-sufficient.

- **Additional funding should be provided as soon as possible to eliminate the wait list and provide these families with the assistance they need.** The families on the wait list are in significant financial distress and at-risk of losing their ability to work and possibly requiring other forms of public assistance. Eliminating the wait list will help to ensure that these families can remain self-sufficient.

- **CCCP staff should work to increase communication with both enrolled and wait listed families and to facilitate ongoing feedback.** Until the wait list can be eliminated, wait listed families need more information and support in managing child care before the subsidy is available to them. Enrolled families need more information about the wide range of services that the CCCP can provide, in order to utilize those services more effectively.

- **Funding should be provided to conduct Phase 2 of the evaluation, to examine the impacts of the other components of the CCCP.** Having shown that the subsidy component of the program is an effective use of public funding, CCCP needs to examine the quality assurance/technical assistance component of the program to determine its effects on the quality of care and subsequent child outcomes. Potential areas for further study include the need to expand the pool of participating providers and the possibility of funding family or in-home care.

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